179

THE ORIGIN OF THE SHRINE

OF

OUR LADY OF REFUGE

Adeicala Mada Kovil at Tirucavelur,

ELAKURICHI

TRICHINOPOLY DISTRICT (INDIA).

8 - OCT 1923
MADRAS
12

TRICHINOPOLY:
ST. JOSEPH'S INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL PRESS.

1923.

NIHIL OBSTAT:

R. MICHOTTE, *Censor Deputatus.*

CUM SUPERIORUM PERMISSU.

✠ A. CHAPUIS,

Bishop of Kumbakonam.

8 - OCT 1923

THE ORIGIN OF THE SHRINE
OF
OUR LADY OF REFUGE
AT TIRUCAVELUR.

Q6.6 N2

At the beginning of the 18th century, the Marattha King of Tanjore began to persecute the Christians; the Missionaries were forbidden to tread the territory of that Kingdom, so that the Christians had to go out of its limits in search of their Priests if they wished to receive the Sacraments.

At Tanjore, Shahji (1682-1711), the Nero of Tanjore (as he was called in a letter of 1712), had imprisoned Father Joseph Carvalho and Michael Bertoldi. The former died in jail at Tanjore on the 14th of November 1701. The latter was detained for several months in prison and suffered many tortures before being set at liberty. 12,000 Christians belonging to the Kingdom of Tanjore bore the brunt of the persecution unflinchingly.

In this extremity, the Missionaries resorted to a means that proved successful: they built a church and a house for the Missionary on the left bank of the Coleroon river at Elakurichi, on the territory of the Nainar of Aryalur, who was neither hostile nor favourable to the Christians. Except at the time of the freshes in the river, the Christians had free access to the Priest from the territory of Tanjore. It was there that the Tanjore Christians crossing the Coleroon, used to repair to celebrate the great feasts of the Church and to re-

ceive the Sacraments. The first who settled there, was Father Simon Carvalho (1700 or 1701), and he was replaced successively by Father Emmanuel Machado (1705) and Father Beschi (1716).

Father Besse * traces the transfer of Father Beschi to the church of Elakurichi to the year 1716 towards the middle of the Lent; and to show the heavy burden this Missionary took up, he adds: " At the time, Father Emmanuel Machado was lying confined in the jails of Tanjore or Vallam (1715-1717), and the church of Puliacudy, the only one left, had just been destroyed by the chief of that village; yet the Christians from Tanjore were not daunted and came to the church of Elakurichi with their accustomed eagerness."

Scarcely, however, had he begun to engage in these apostolic labours and breathe more freely, when his Superiors had to send him to another field of action; but he came back to Elakurichi the same year for the Christmas festivities.

The walls of the church and house built by Father Simon Carvalho at Elakurichi were made of mud and covered with a thatched roof; the church was divided into two parts: the front portion being used as an oratory, and the other as retiring room or house for the Missionary.

Father Beschi began to build a new church in 1717; it was to be more in harmony with the decency and the respect due to the Divine Majesty and more suited to the great crowds of Christians gathering there. The church of Father Beschi is the actual one covered with

---

* Information is mostly taken from the life of Fr. Beschi by Father Besse, S.J. The Missionaries of those times were attached to the Madura Mission entrusted to the Society of Jesus.

a dome—the other buildings have been eventually added.

The Christians continued to go to Elakurichi during the subsequent years to receive the Sacraments, as the persecution had not abated in the kingdom of Tanjore: Sarabodji (1711-1729) was at first tolerant, but the Christians soon regretted his brother and predecessor, Shahji.

In time of persecutions, this church had been the head-quarters of the Missionary, but by a special intervention of Our Lady, it has become a blessed shrine which attracts crowds of pilgrims even in our own days.

In 1727, the Lutheran Danish missionaries of Tranquebar endeavoured to pervert the Christians of Tanjore.

Those Lutherans, says Father Guiliani, sent their catechists with their pockets well supplied in order to throw trouble and disorder among the Tanjore Christians. They had printed and published the sacred Scriptures in rather coarse Tamil and have disfigured them by their commentaries full of errors against the true faith, and had also published a good many other books more or less heretical. In the meantime, Father Beschi, who was in charge of the district, threatened with these heretics, received orders from his Superior to write a book refuting their errors.

Father Besse adds: " The hopes of the Superior were not disappointed. From the year 1727 dates a most important work of Father Beschi, in which he exposes with great lucidity the principal tenets of the Catholic Church then in controversy with the Lutherans. It is the 'Veda Vilakkam' which contains so

many pointed arguments that pierce the Lutheran heresy."

But, on account of the famine which prevailed in the kingdom of Tanjore in 1729, when the merchants had sent rice to the adjoining kingdoms as far as Cape Comorin, when the multitudes of famished people who flocked thither rendered the famine still more terrible, then under the pangs of hunger, a large number of neophytes became easy prey to the heretics who attracted them by money more than by arguments.

Father Beschi understood, says Father Guerreire for 1729, that to save the neophytes from heresy or bring them back to the Catholic faith, it was not enough to have recourse to the means he has made use of so far, either by writing books or sending letters to the Christians at the cost of much labour. He wrote everything to the Bishop of Mylapore to whom all those neophytes belonged and requested him to exhort them in a pastoral letter: to celebrate every year a solemn feast in honour of our Lady of Refuge (*Adeicala Mada*), and on the following day to have a solemn anniversary for the souls in purgatory. "With the permission of the Bishop, the neophytes celebrated those festivals with all possible pomp, and at once Father Beschi had the happiness to see the progress of the heretics checked and their boldness broken. No more Christians embraced the party of the Danes, and among those who had apostatized a good many came back to the bosom of the Church."

Father Joseph Vieyera relates for 1730 that: "great is the devotion of the Christians towards our Lady of Refuge, who has been recently venerated in the church of Elakurichi in order to triumph over the

44868

heretics; from day to day new prodigies serve only to increase their piety."

We are therefore justified in asserting that this dedication of the Church of Elakurichi to Our Lady of Refuge has been agreeable to the Blessed Mother and her Divine Son.

From this time, the spot where the Church of Our Lady of Refuge is situated has been called Tirucavelur (the village of the holy guardian); and to show his gratitude, the great poet Father Beschi composed the famous poem: *Adeicala Mada Thirukavelur Kalambagam.* Indeed to our Lady of Refuge he entrusted the care of preserving his flock from the Protestant incursions.

To testify more and more his gratitude and to render more secure the protection of our Divine Mother, Father Beschi begged through his Superior at Rome an approbation by the Pope of the feast already established by the authority of the Bishop to be celebrated in honour of Our Lady of Refuge at Elakurichi every year on the 3rd Sunday after Easter; he requested also that an indulgence be granted to the pilgrims who would flock there on that occasion.

Father Besse remarks that the pontifical Brief, granting the confirmation of the feast of Elakurichi instituted in 1729 and the plenary indulgence, reached Father Beschi at the end of 1733.

The event related below, coming not long after the receipt of the final approbation by the Pope of the festivities in honour of Our Lady of Refuge at Tirukavelur, Elakurichi, established the conviction that the Blessed Virgin has shown visibly her desire to be honoured in this shrine, the scene of her boundless mercy.

Qb:6
123

That event, as narrated by Father Salvator dos Reys, is as follows: "The church of Elakurichi was much honoured together with its Missionary by the Zamindar in whose states it is situated. This prince came to see the Missionary, and after a conversation which lasted part of the day and of the night, about our holy religion, he made presents to the Missionary according to the custom of the country and confirmed also the perpetual donation of the site on which the church and presbytery are built and a vast and spacious plot of land around it; and in order that the donation *be known to posterity*, he caused to be erected near the church an enormous stone upon which was engraved in Tamil letters the said donation, and he bound himself and his successors by an inviolable oath." *

This inscription is dated 26 Adi year Ratchada 1657, corresponding to August 5, 1735.

The stone is always on the bank of the tank behind the church.

It is nearly two hundred years since the dedication of the church of Tirukavelur, Elakurichi, to our Lady of Refuge (*Adeicala Mada*).† The Christians have not abandoned the tradition of their ancestors, and every year large crowds of them (some from very far) gather there for the festivities of the 3d Sunday after Easter. This fact has not escaped the notice of the officers who have prepared the Trichinopoly Gazetteer where it is recorded :

---

* This endowment has been recognized only in part by the British Government Officers.

† The church of Adeicala Mada is now under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Kumbakonam diocese entrusted to the Foreign Missions S ociety of Paris.

"Elakurichi 25 miles south of Jayakondashola-
"puram, population 2,294, known for its Roman
"Catholic Church which is said to be of great age
"and attracts numerous pilgrims. It is said that as
"many as 10,000 Christians annually congregate
"there during the festival held in April."

This number is no more exact. Directing as Parish Priest the festivities of the 3d Sunday after Easter for 34 years, I should assert that the number of Christians gathering there has increased largely and may be estimated at 15,000, and perhaps more.

Is it not a proof that the divine favours thro' the intercession of Our blessed Mother have never ceased to pour in that shrine which has seen the sorrows and the vicissitudes of the Christians in those dark days of persecution and fight for the faith; is it not an encouragement for the Christians to flock more and more every year to that blessed church to partake of the divine blessings?

15th August 1923. G. PLAYOUST.

Note.—The festivities at Elakurichi, Tirukavelur, are celebrated on the 3d Sunday after Easter and the days previous. Elakurichi belongs to the Parish of Ayyampet on the South Indian Railway, north-east of Tanjore, and is about 5 miles distant from the parish centre

Q6:6 N2
44848